

DOROTHY ROSS CARMER

INDUSTRIAL LIFE OF THE BLIND IN CENTRAL
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Perhaps there is no subject more comprehensively involving all human activities than that of the industrial life of a community. The community's very growth is dependent upon it. By taking part in the industrial life of one's own city one becomes a producer and assumes a sense of responsibility. The handicapped groups must of necessity be contributors to this society of which they are a part, otherwise they are a liability.

This realization is being more keenly and universally understood each day, in Europe, as well as in America. Some legislation has been put through in favor of the "handicapped." Not to subsidize, but to open opportunities whereby they may be given a chance to compete, to create, or to express themselves, side by side with the normal workman, and so be lifted from their physical captivity.

In taking up the subject, of "The Industrial life of the Blind in Central Europe," I shall confine myself to Austria, Czechoslovakia and Germany and try to make you understand the conditions under which the blind are working. Austria like "Cinderella after the ball," Czechoslovakia enthusiastically energetic in her new found freedom, and Germany hard working and practical, are all attempting to solve their problems in the light of their own needs.

Austria from a great manufacturing employer has changed to an unemployed employee. Her prestige and her coal mines are gone, so she must now wait to harness her water power and adjust

¹ Read at The American Association of Workers for the Blind, Atlantic City, June, 1927.

her internal debt before she can hope for a return to her old position as a competitor. Almost at the breaking point her finances were rescued in 1922, and watched until 1926, but her trade is still inadequate and her unemployment serious. Over three hundred thousand unemployed in Vienna alone during this past winter. Is there any wonder that the "blind" feel the reaction directly and indirectly? What is their chance for employment or factory placement under present conditions?

Eight or nine men are working in a pulp factory and giving satisfactory results. This is work that could be more thoroughly manned by the "blind," and undoubtedly will be in time but now the problem of the unemployed normal workman interferes. The tobacco shops are owned by the government, and the veterans blinded during the war are given preference on the application lists.

Siegfried Altman, Director of the Jewish Institute for the Blind, says that the suggestions he made in his book, written before the War, "Possibilities and Necessities of Creating New Professions for the Blind," have all proved possible of accomplishment. He is working with Dr. Paul Perls of the Siemens-Schuckert works in Berlin, in regard to factory placement. There is a branch of this concern in Vienna where at present six blind men are employed. They hope to raise the number to thirty.

However, for the most part, in Austria the blind man is limited in his work to piano tuning, chair caning, brush making and some basket weaving. The "Shops" are cold and unattractive, the hours long and the pay inadequate.

If the blind man lives in Vienna and wants to join the "Blind Unit" or association he becomes a member in the following way. He must work six weeks without pay, but will have his carfare and dinner given him. At the end of this time he will start with small payment as a regular workman. He must now register with, or be inscribed in, "Sick Insurance." This is a state law for all employees in Austria. The employee must pay one third the interest monthly and the employer is responsible for two thirds. The rate is based on classification of trade and that in turn is based on wages. This law protects the worker as the

employer must pay the salary during the employee's illness. The whole amount for part of the time and a percentage after that. The employee must, of course, be examined by state doctors and may be given free hospital service, if necessary. When sick at home a little extra money, besides wages, is given to procure medicine, better food, etc. No employer can discharge an employee certified by a state doctor.

The blind man joining the "Unit" has also a claim on two weeks vacation in the country for himself and family. A small amount of money is allowed for food and their lodgings are free.

The blind worker, in Austria, is usually paid by the piece and when he cannot produce enough to be economically independent he is given a small subsidy by the government.

Being independent economically though, in Austria, is not our idea of economic freedom. Nor is every one in Austria satisfied with the conditions. There are struggles with the government to get more help and support for the blind. There is criticism on the way the "Welfare for the Blind" is handled. In a pamphlet on the "Better Welfare for the Blind" the following suggestions are made:

The blind should be put in the center of the problems on social welfare. Reforms should be made in their social, physical, mental and economic conditions. Persons blinded in adult life who want to continue in their old professions should be given more opportunity for rehabilitation. Before all else, a law should be passed for the compulsory education of the blind children, as Germany carried it through before the war.

Let us hope that these laws for reforms may be brought about in Austria in the near future. We may then be able to look to that country for the inspiration in welfare work that we now find in medicine, drama, music, and painting.

Czechoslovakia, with Prague as its capital, is an up and doing little republic. As in other new states of Central Europe one feels very keenly its intense racial pride and the determination to develop its own national life. Dr. Hu Shih has defined "Nationalism" so clearly and his remarks are so apropos of Czechoslovakia's

spirit. "Nationalism is essentially a faith, expressing a belief in the potentiality of the nation in throwing off the yoke of imperialism and in developing her own resources, her own power, her own traditions into a pacific nation, ready to contribute her proper share in the rebuilding of the world's civilization."

This Czechoslovakia is trying to do. The present movements of the Sokols, of social hygiene, of the tuberculosis campaign and the Junior Red Cross in the schools are only phases of a larger movement which might be likened to a renaissance in which the welfare of the blind will undoubtedly be a part.

The commission for the blind is now supported by appropriations from the ministry of social welfare. Its purpose is as follows: Investigating all cases of blindness brought to their attention. Placing in hospitals the sick blind who need medical care, and sending the children to institutions when necessary. From birth to seven years of age there are institutional homes which fill this need.

Educational institutions carry on the work from the ages of seven to thirty. From fifty years on there are institutions for the aged as there is no actual relief in money for them.

The educational system is divided into two sections. The elementary schools where the children attend from seven to fourteen or sixteen years of age and the industrial where they can enter, or stay until they are thirty. In the elementary schools they are given some handwork and the exceptional ones taught typewriting, but for the most part primary subjects and music are stressed.

In the industrial schools, typewriting can be continued. The other subjects taught are heavy door mat weaving and braiding, brush making, basketry, chair seating and much work on the flat knitting machines for stockings. Adults becoming blinded are taught a trade at the institution and on returning home to work alone, are assisted by the commission with loans of money until they are established. Small relief is also given from time to time, when needed, to blind living at homes in isolated districts where they cannot carry on any industrial work. When a blind

person is given money as relief or loan by the commission, he must report back to the commission as to how he spends it.

The blind in Moravia and Bohemia have been taught trades for many, many years but in Slovakia the instruction is just beginning.

There is definite placement work being done in Prague, but like the other cities in Europe where the question of unemployed is so serious, there are limits to the work. A large manufacturer of shoes in the city is running a factory on a model of Henry Ford and is employing 50 blind persons with perfect satisfaction. An electrical factory is employing 5 and in a tobacco factory they are keeping 203 blind girls at work. These last figures seem almost fanciful.

The war-blinded are in a class by themselves. As in Austria they have first call on the tobacco shops owned by the government. There are special institutions for them, and if totally blind and living at home they receive a small pension yearly.

The blind, who are working independently, have formed Associations and the Domovina Slepcev or Home for the Blind is one of these. This association has been a going concern for twenty-five years and boasts of 300 members. It owns a building which contains fifteen or twenty small living apartments and in addition a workshop and office. It is run, they say, entirely by the blind and has only two sighted people to assist. In the workshop they make the heavy rope rugs and carpets for the churches and a heavy broom which the city buys for street cleaning. Men and women work together, the women making a smaller brush. Of course private funds are behind this scheme, but they make no statement as to the proportion of the yearly deficit nor as to what wages are paid. Very, very low, undoubtedly, from the looks of the workers, workroom and equipment. It is a community of blind, for the blind, conceived by the blind, but its value is a subject open to discussion.

It is to be hoped that Czechoslovakia now awakening in a new era will be stimulated to help more constructively the thousands of its blind men and women now free citizens of a free state.

Germany, despite the distressing internal situation, has been able to put through a law, regarding the employment of the handicapped, which is of very vital interest to the blind. This law was enacted in 1919 with an amendment in 1923. It was sponsored by the war-injured and functions all over Germany.

This welfare law states that there were 2734 blinded in the last war. Employers are responsible for giving employment to a certain per cent of the war handicapped and all blind are included in this term. There must be two handicapped persons to every one hundred employees.

Section 3 of the law reads,

The heavily handicapped men coming under this law are Germans who have lost 50 per cent of their earning capacity, either through injury during work or by other accident, and through the state welfare law, the military law, or the laws which the state welfare law declares adjustable, or on the basis of the accident insurance of the state welfare law (of June 1901) have a right to claim a pension or subsidy on the percentage of their reduced earning power. The State Minister of Labor can with permission of the Reichsrath make aliens come under the protection of this law.

Section 5 reads that the State Minister of Labor must notify an employer as to how many vacancies he should make. If the minister of labor wishes to put in more than 2 per cent handicapped labor he will have to have the consent of the Reichsrath.

Section 5, part 2, reads "A post or bench is counted as a place for an employee or workman in the meaning of the law." There must be an overseer representing the workman, (member of union, etc.) according to law of February, 1920, in every group of employees.

Section WW reads that in all shops where there are war handicapped men there must also be an overseer, who himself is a war cripple.

A committee for "Examination and adaptation of new professions and working possibilities for the blind" has been formed by representatives of industry and trade, as well as blind experts, with the results that about two hundred possibilities have been

given blind people, through adaptation of machines, etc., in trades manned by the sighted.

In addition to this committee, the interests of the blind are also looked after by a state commission made up of the Minister of Labor, Minister of Education, and Minister of Welfare. In preparing laws for the blind this commission works in coöperation with "The Blind Relief Chamber," a private organization.

There is an interesting little pamphlet, published quite recently by the Employment Exchange for the Handicapped, on the "Professional Welfare for War and Civil Blind in Berlin." The preface is a short report on the development of social welfare, carried on by the bureau, for those reduced in earning capacity by handicap through accident.

At this employment bureau confidential and individual advice is given. Choice and selection of work is made in consultation with employers. There is also, at first, inspection of the finished product. Supervision is continued without interfering with the worker's freedom. Its aim is to secure good economic conditions for the blind by increasing their efficiency to full earning capacity in suitable work. Wages on piece work should be the same as the sighted workman receives. Every blind person, registered with the bureau, is thoroughly examined by a physician for eye condition and physical disease. The bureau then continues its interest in helping to prepare the work place, tools, machines, etc., adjusting them to fit each individual case.

As a result of this law we find 150 blind typists employed in Germany. Seventy of them in offices in Berlin. Masseurs are successful at present, due to the tremendous wave of enthusiasm for physical culture.

There are factory placements in the following trades: Document binding, metal, tobacco, food, chemicals, paper and card board, brushes, cloth, and dress manufacturing. Statistics may be had in regard to actual numbers, process and other information concerning the blind, and the part they play in any of these great "Fabriks" as they call them, but we will only stop for detail in one of them. That of the Siemens-Schuckert Works in Berlin,

which I had the good fortune to see so thoroughly through the courtesy of one of the directors, Dr. Paul H. Perls.

This large plant has factories and work shops in many cities of Germany and blind men are employed in all of them. At Siemens Town, Berlin, there are 98 blind men working. They have demonstrated that they are fully capable of executing difficult work under various processes. Boring a series of holes in metal by the aid of a pattern and serving simultaneously two and three semi-automatic drilling machines. These machines are, of course, especially constructed. This very important part of the work is in charge of a special engineer, Dr. Rahn, who has been remarkably successful, and extremely clever, in the hundreds of adaptations he has made both for safety and efficiency.

The machines have all been provided with suitable safety devices for protection, especially of the hands. Unless a man is quite sure he is not in danger he can not work with freedom. Punching machines are so arranged that they can not operate without both hands working the lever. Riveting machines automatically push the hands away when they come too near.

The blind men are always seated next to men able to see, and often are working on the same process, with a machine adapted to their handicap. The faithful German shepherd dog, who acts as guide, lies under the work bench when his master is busy.

In a recent communication from Dr. Perls, in which he enclosed a weekly payroll of one department, he stated that the average blind man's wage is about 70 per cent of that of a sighted man's.

The street cars in Berlin provide free passage for blind workmen going to and from their place of business, if they present a certificate. A four weeks' holiday yearly, with the railway fare there and back, is given every blind employee of the Siemens-Schuckert works. This includes a member of his family and it is spent at the Siemens convalescent home on the Baltic.

This law for the handicapped is a big step in advance over the old methods, but with the majority of the average Germans they still feel that an institution or home is the mecca for the old, the unfortunate, and the handicapped. The government has always so provided for the needs of the people, that they little know what

private charity is or the civic responsibility one owes the less fortunate. Some private welfare organizations have been established and the directors and workers are looking to America for information and statistics on actual accomplishment. However, best of all here in Germany, the forward looking spirits are keeping ahead of the times and making a place for the blind in the industrial life of the community.

